

Cowan's "Five Ways": A Catholic Perspective

Most Catholic apologists are probably unfamiliar with the five styles of doing apologetics that my former officemate, Steve Cowan, describes in his article. The renaissance in Catholic apologetics that began in the late 1980s has been concerned with practical and reactive apologetics—with how to defend the faith *vis-à-vis* particular groups attacking it (Fundamentalists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.). There has been little discussion of general Christian apologetics and even less discussion of apologetic method.

In the same time period, our Evangelical brethren have been doing much higher-level apologetics and engaging in more profound discussions of apologetic method. We need to catch up.

We've been doing apologetics longer than our Evangelical brethren. They've been at it for only five hundred years, whereas we've been doing it for two thousand. Many of the approaches discussed in Steve's article originated in Catholic circles. We need to re-learn our own heritage of apologetics and understand what advances have been made by Evangelicals. To that end, I recommend both Steve's article and his book *Five Views on Apologetics*, as well as the writers he mentions. Here I'd like to offer some analysis of how to evaluate the five views from a Catholic perspective.

Classical Method

The classical method is congenial to Catholic apologetics. As Steve notes, it often is attributed to such Catholic authors as Anselm and

Thomas Aquinas. Numerous Catholic apologetics books of a generation ago followed the “two-step” method of first arguing for the existence of God and then offering specifically Christian evidences.

But they went on to add a third step: a consideration of Catholic evidences. In Catholic circles it has been standard to argue first that you should believe in God, then that you should be a Christian, and then that you should be a Catholic.

The classical method also finds support in the teachings of the magisterium. The ecumenical council that had the most to say about apologetic method was Vatican I (1870). Among other points, it infallibly rejected the proposition that “the one, true God, our creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason” (*Dei Filius* 2:1). The Council also infallibly rejected the proposition that “miracles can never be known with certainty, nor can the divine origin of the Christian religion be proved from them” (DF 3:4).

Between these two pronouncements, the Council emphasized the *possibility* of the classical method. In other words, it is an approach that *can* work. Proponents of other approaches, at least in Catholic circles, cannot legitimately claim that the classical method is inherently unworkable, as some Evangelicals have argued.

On the other hand, the Council did not say that the classical method is the *only* workable approach.

Evidential Method

Proponents of the classical method often have criticized the evidential method’s “one-step” approach by arguing that if you don’t first show

that God exists, then you can't know how to interpret an event like the Resurrection. As a result, you can't use a miracle to show God's existence.

To me, it seems perfectly fine to reason in this way: If an event such as the Resurrection can be shown to have happened, then it was something dramatically different than what ordinarily happens in nature. If something dramatically out of the ordinary occurs, then those who predicted it and were involved in it are qualified to interpret it for us. Christ predicted his own Resurrection and was involved in it, so he is qualified to interpret it for us. He indicated that it was done by the power of God, which is possible only if God exists. Therefore, Christ's Resurrection gives us reason to believe that God exists.

It is true that a person who is *closed* to the possibility of God's existence may not find this line of reasoning persuasive, but then he isn't likely to be open to the idea of the Resurrection or the classical arguments for God's existence either. He will try to interpret the data in some other way, however implausible a proposal he may be left with.

What is truly necessary is not *proof* that God exists before one starts reasoning from miracles but *openness* to God's existence. If a person is open to God's existence and to the idea that he might perform miracles, then documenting miracles should serve as evidence for him to believe in God.

It also seems that the apostles reasoned in something much like this manner in their own apologetics. To pagans who may have believed in some gods but not in the true God, the apostles pointed out that associated with Christ were fulfilled prophecies, the Resurrection, and other miracles that vouchsafed the Christian message—including its

claim that God exists.

A more basic problem for classical method critics of the evidential method is that their criticism strikes at their own position. The classical method begins by trying to prove God's existence by pointing to the existence of the universe or some features of the universe (e.g., the fact that it had a beginning or displays order) and then arguing that only a being such as God could have produced the universe or the features we see in it. In other words, it took a miracle.

Thus it seems to me that classical-method proponents are themselves making arguments for God's existence based on miracles; they simply have picked a different kind of miracle than the type that evidential apologists usually select. As a result, it seems to me that Catholics can employ the evidential method to good effect.

Some recent Evangelical exponents of the classical method (e.g., J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, Douglas Geivett) also have come to the conclusion that the evidential method is not impossible in principle, though they feel that the classical methodology is stronger.

The Cumulative-Case Method

This method also has significant resonance with Catholic apologists, such as Blaise Pascal. In his work *Pensees*, he appeals to a variety of types of evidence for the Christian faith.

Advocates of the other apologetic methods frequently use a cumulative-case approach without realizing it. For example, there is a remarkable degree of similarity between the classical and cumulative-case methods. Classical-method apologists commonly try to use deductive arguments for the existence of God. These are the gold standard of argumentation.

If the premises of a properly formed deductive argument are true, then its conclusion *has* to be true.

Most arguments are not purely deductive. They do not *guarantee* the conclusion that flows from them; rather, they establish its probability. The concept of probability is a tricky one, and despite the term's mathematical overtones, many things we judge probable or improbable cannot be measured or have numbers assigned to them. A man may judge it overwhelmingly probable that his wife loves him, but how do you assign numbers to that?

Classical-method apologists don't like that, and they tend to shy away from arguments that are not deductive or are at least capable of being cast in a logical or mathematical form. This means that they are uncomfortable with the approach taken by cumulative-case apologists. But in actuality, they themselves use a cumulative case.

In making a two- or three-step argument, classical-method apologists end up appealing to a corresponding number of kinds of evidence. When arguing for God's existence based on the existence of the universe, they appeal to one kind of evidence. But since such arguments can prove *theism* but not *Christianity*, they must supplement their case with a new type of evidences, such as fulfilled prophecies in the Bible or the Resurrection of Christ.

Cumulative-case apologists are simply clearer about the fact that they are appealing to different types of evidence and thus are more willing to appeal to more types of evidence. At bottom the difference seems to be largely a matter of degree. Classical-method apologists will try to honor the traditional two- or three-step argument, while cumulative-case apologists will tend to be more eclectic in the types of evidence to

which they appeal and less structured in the way that evidence is presented.

Presuppositional Method

At first glance the presuppositional method seems unpromising from a Catholic perspective. This conviction is strengthened when one reads the most prominent presuppositionalists.

Their writings are loaded with attitude. They can sound so cocksure that others in the Evangelical apologetics community can have a difficult time talking and interacting with them. (Steve's book is a welcome exception.)

According to typical presuppositionalists, the main thing that we must presuppose is the truth and the ultimate and unique authority of God's word, by which they mean Scripture. As a result, presuppositionalists wed their methodology to the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*. This opens their position to all the usual problems with *sola scriptura*.

Presuppositionalists frequently claim that *only* Christianity is capable of making sense of things and providing a consistent basis for rational thought. But this claim is obviously false. Unless one wants to say that Jews prior to the time of Christ were irrational, then it would seem that one can be rational even if one has only a subset of Christian revelation.

Frequently presuppositionalists disparage any attempt to prove the existence of God or argue for Christianity by natural reason, which they hold to be utterly corrupt apart from the inspiration provided by the Holy Spirit.

We have seen that Vatican I infallibly defined the possibility of proving God's existence by natural reason and of appealing to miracles in proof of the Christian faith, but in one canon the Council put an even sharper point on the matter when it infallibly rejected the proposition that "divine revelation cannot be made credible by external signs, and that therefore men and women ought to be moved to faith only by each one's internal experience or private inspiration" (DF 3:3).

So is there any use at all that a Catholic might have for presuppositional methodology? Actually, there is.

As a methodology, presuppositionalism is not intrinsically arrogant. It is perfectly possible to apply the method in a more humble and reasonable manner, as in the case of the method's current leading light, John Frame. There is no necessary union between the presuppositional method and *sola scriptura*. If one wanted, one could construe God's word more generally, including not only the material passed on in Scripture but also that passed on in Tradition as well.

Yet there is a more promising way to construct presuppositional methodology along Catholic lines. Without presupposing specifically Christian revelation, one can't argue transcendently for Christianity itself; but by not insisting on specifically Christian revelation as a presupposition, one can avoid some of the most telling objections to the method.

On the other hand, one can *invite* individuals to presuppose Christian worldview and ask them to see how it makes sense of the world. Something like this seems to happen whenever a person is converting to Christ. There tends to be a period in which a person "tries on" Christian spectacles to see how the world looks through them, and

there is nothing wrong with inviting people to do this.

One doesn't have to accept the disparagement of *any* attempt to make revelation credible by external signs or arguments for God's existence. We can treat the presuppositional method as a complement to the others. Indeed, this is the position taken by some presuppositionalists. Taken in this way, our reconstructed presuppositionalism is not inconsistent with Vatican I.

The Reformed-Epistemological Method

To many the central claim of Reformed epistemology—that it can be rational to believe in God and Christ without evidence—may seem so counterintuitive that it is impossible for the idea to find any traction in Catholic thought.

Actually, the two cohere so well that when Alvin Plantinga began to popularize his views on religious epistemology, Catholic philosophers pointed out that ideas he traced back to Calvin actually go back to Aquinas. Of late (in his book *Warranted Christian Belief*), Plantinga has begun to speak of the “Aquinas/Calvin model.”

Part of the disconnect seems to be the language that Plantinga and others have used to articulate their views. They do not mean what they appear to be saying when they claim that it is rational to believe in God without evidence. The problem is in how the word *evidence* is being used.

Reformed epistemologists do not mean that one is warranted in believing in God and Christ without any basis whatsoever. They mean that one does not have to construct and deliberate on traditional propositional arguments. Instead, one can adopt the Christian faith

pre-reflectively, as in fact many people do when they are taught it as children, for example.

It is just as rational to accept the Christian worldview in this way as it is to accept any other worldview, including a secular one. In fact, most of the propositions we accept are adopted pre-reflectively. We don't sit down and construct and deliberate upon detailed logical proofs for most of the things we believe. Humans aren't designed to work that way.

Yet that doesn't mean that we don't have *evidence* for most of what we believe. We do. We simply analyze and act on it without first casting it in logical form. If our parents teach us that electrons exist or that you need money to buy candy or that Christ died for our sins, then we have been given evidence for these things, and it is rational for us to believe them until we're shown convincing reasons to the contrary.

We also can be warranted in our belief in God by the general *sensus divinitatis* (sense of the divine) that may be triggered in any number of ways, and this also would constitute a form of evidence in ordinary speech.

Unfortunately, Reformed epistemologists have adopted a provocative vocabulary that sometimes disguises the reasonableness of their position, but a reasonable one it is. We *are* entitled to continue acting on our pre-reflective beliefs until we are shown reasons they should be rejected, and thus far nobody has come up with solid reasons that the Christian worldview should be jettisoned.

This method coheres well with the thought of Aquinas, who pointed out that although it is *possible* to construct detailed proofs of the

Christian faith (*à la* the classical method), these tend to remain beyond the reach of the average believer.

Aquinas acknowledged that “to know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature” (*Summa Theologiae* I:2:1 ad 1) and that, although it can be rigorously proven, “there is nothing to prevent a man who cannot grasp a proof accepting, as a matter of faith, something that in itself is capable of being scientifically known and demonstrated” (ST I:2:2 ad 1).

What Evangelicals Can Learn From Us

As we have noted, many of the apologetic styles currently being explored by Evangelicals have their roots in Catholic thought. As Catholics, we need to reappropriate these elements of our own apologetic heritage, as well as new insights that may be found among Evangelical writers.

For their part, Evangelical apologists have something to learn from Catholics. Though they would not recognize the authority of pronouncements related to apologetics by the Catholic Church, these still can be helpful pointers for them, particularly those of Vatican I. Catholics have been thinking about the science and art of apologetics for a lot longer than Evangelicals, and it would be foolish for them to ignore potential insights that might be derived from Catholic sources.

There is also something Evangelicals can learn from the current renaissance in Catholic apologetics. Because they have been focused on dealing with *specific* movements and individuals, Catholic apologists have been pushed toward what I call “toolbox apologetics,” which recognizes that there is not a single, prefabricated way to get the task

of apologetics done. Instead, each situation is different, because people are coming to Christ from different places, and they have different questions and concerns. A workman may pull from his toolbox whatever tool is needed to do the job at hand, and in the same way an apologist must realize that he needs to shape his apologetics to serve the individuals he encounters.

The traditional Evangelical approaches have placed less emphasis on this, with many authors seeming to think that there is only *one* right way to do apologetics, to which all apologists should conform. But when one takes the more practical, “toolbox” approach, it is possible to discern value in each of the apologetic methods. If done right, they all have their place in helping people toward faith.